

The relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout and defense mechanisms of psychotherapists

Natalia Bokowy (Ptak)

Abstract

Objectives: A previous research paper showed that individual defense styles mediate the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout among psychotherapists. It was decided to check which defense mechanisms may be involved in these relationships and examine the relationships that exist between temperamental traits and professional burnout and defense mechanisms in a group of psychotherapists.

Methods: Eighty-two individuals working in the psychotherapy profession participated in the study. Three psychological tools were used: (1) FCB-TI(R), (2) DSQ-40, (3) OLBI, as well as own questionnaire used to describe the study group.

Results: The conducted analyses showed correlations between temperamental traits and defense mechanisms and between professional burnout and defense mechanisms of psychotherapists.

Discussion and Conclusions: Psychotherapists who are characterized by a high level of perseverance and emotional reactivity use neurotic and immature defense mechanisms to a greater extent, and mature defense mechanisms to a lesser extent. In turn, psychotherapists who are characterized by a high level of briskness and endurance use neurotic and immature defense mechanisms to a lesser extent. It is possible that the more frequent use of somatization, displacement, schizoid fantasy, isolation, acting out, projection and undoing by psychotherapists may translate into a higher level of professional burnout. Instead, it seems beneficial to use suppression and pseudoaltruism, the use of which probably reduces the level of burnout in a group of psychotherapists. However, these results would require repetition in a larger research group to confirm the revealed relationships and further exploration. In subsequent research, it is worth checking the mediating effect of individual defense mechanisms in the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout among psychotherapists.

temperamental traits; defense mechanisms; professional burnout; psychotherapists

INTRODUCTION

Defense mechanisms are defined as automatic, often involuntary psychological processes that

occur outside a person's awareness and protect them against anxiety and other internal or external stressors [1-3]. Hence it can be assumed that defense mechanisms modify the perception of internal and external realities that the individual cannot cope with (in this case, stress and professional burnout). Furthermore, it seems that adaptive/mature defense mechanisms mitigate

Natalia Bokowy (Ptak): Jagiellonian University, Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Institute of Applied Psychology
Correspondence address: nataliabokowy@gmail.com

the resulting conflict and thus determine the individual's mental health [4-7]. The term „use“ has been used for the purpose of this article. It should be remembered that since defense mechanisms are unconscious (at least to a large extent), psychotherapists need their own therapy and constant care for the development towards maturity of the observer's mentalization, etc.

A previous research paper showed that individual defense styles mediate the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout among psychotherapists [8]. The use of mature defense mechanisms by psychotherapists with higher level of perseverance and emotional reactivity presumably protects them against the development of professional burnout. It can be assumed that the use of immature defense mechanisms by psychotherapists with higher level of perseverance, emotional reactivity, endurance and activity expose them to a greater risk of professional burnout. Presumably, their level of burnout is higher than if they did not use immature defense mechanisms. The use of neurotic defense mechanisms by psychotherapists with a higher level of perseverance and emotional reactivity probably has a neutral effect (neither protects nor exposes) the development of professional burnout.

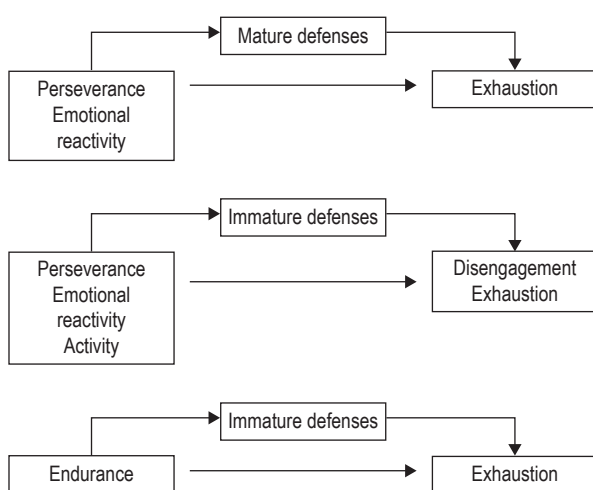


Figure 1. Results of the previous study.

Source: Own study.

It was decided to check which defense mechanisms may be involved in these relationships. In subsequent research, it is worth checking the mediating effect of individual defense mecha-

nisms in the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout among psychotherapists. This study is an introduction to attempts to investigate this issue. It was decided to examine the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout and individual defense mechanisms of psychotherapists.

METHODS

The hypotheses that will be presented later in the work were formulated based on available literature and research results on similar issues. The research questions and hypotheses are presented below:

1. What is the relationship between temperamental traits and defense mechanisms of psychotherapists?
2. What is the relationship between defense mechanisms and professional burnout of psychotherapists?

Research hypothesis 1: Some temperamental traits correlate positively and some negatively with particular defense mechanisms of psychotherapists.

Research hypothesis 2: Defense mechanisms, depending on the level of maturity, correlate positively or negatively with professional burnout.

During the study, each person was asked to complete a survey and three psychological questionnaires. Thanks to this, it was possible to measure individual variables.

The following research tools were used: Formal Characteristics of Behaviour – Temperament Inventory in the revised version (FCB-TI) by M. Cyniak-Cieciura, B. Zawadzki and J. Strelau, (2) Defense Style Questionnaire – DSQ-40 in the Polish adaptation by A. Kokoszka, (3) Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – OLBI in the Polish adaptation by T. Chirkowska-Smolak, as well as the author's survey developed to describe the study group.

The self-developed survey included questions about the gender and age of psychotherapists, as well as the studies they completed. They were asked questions related to their profession, the psychotherapist's certificate, psychotherapeutic approach and place of work. Moreover, the survey contained issues related to their total

job seniority and on current position. This was a condition set by the OLBI questionnaire’s author, enabling the use of this tool.

RESULTS

The analysis of the results began with the characteristics of the study group.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study group (N=82)

Variable			
Gender (n, %)	Woman	73	89
	Man	9	11
Age (M, SD)	Woman	39.38	9.163
	Man	41.00	8.746
	Altogether	39.56	9.080
Studies (n, %)	Psychological	72	88
	Pedagogical	8	10
	Sociological	1	1
	Medical	3	4
	Other	9	11
Psychotherapeutic certification (n, %)	Yes	23	28
	No	59	72
Psychotherapeutic approach (n, %)	Psychoanalytic	7	9
	Psychodynamic	43	52
	Cognitive-behavioural	10	12
	Systemic	34	41
	Humanistic-existential	7	9
	Integrative	15	18
	Other	3	4
Employment (n, %)	Public sector	48	59
	Private sector	31	38
	Self-employment	55	67
Seniority (M, SD)	Woman	9.08	7.631
	Man	12.00	5.937
	Altogether	9.40	7.489

Source: Own Study.

Descriptive statistics

In the first step, the following descriptive statistics were determined for the analysed questionnaire variables and normality analysis was performed. The obtained results [8] allowed for correlation analysis.

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In order to verify the first and second research hypotheses, it was decided to analyze the relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout and defense mechanisms. The analysis was performed using Spearman’s Rho correlation coefficient. The significance level adopted was 0.05.

Table 2. The relationships between temperamental traits and professional burnout and defense mechanisms of psychotherapists (N=82)

Defense mechanisms	Briskness	Perseverance	Rhythmicality	Sensory Sensitivity	Endurance	Emotional Reactivity	Activity	Disengagement	Exhaustion
Sublimation	-0.041	0.177	0.102	0.229*	0.004	0.058	0.095	-0.086	-0.196
Humor	0.196	-0.305**	0.198	0.200	0.172	-0.226*	0.179	-0.121	-0.168
Anticipation	0.102	-0.011	0.058	0.060	-0.006	-0.127	0.093	-0.145	-0.180
Suppression	0.185	-0.512**	0.161	0.156	0.259*	-0.417**	0.106	-0.336**	-0.397**
Undoing	-0.018	0.411**	-0.059	0.037	-0.121	0.484**	-0.123	0.253*	0.129
Pseudoaltruism	-0.075	0.172	-0.016	0.005	-0.188	0.043	0.114	-0.351**	-0.067
Idealization	-0.141	-0.033	-0.067	0.126	-0.063	-0.081	0.062	-0.144	-0.164
Reaction Formation	0.057	0.074	0.135	-0.024	0.137	0.321**	-0.087	0.191	0.179
Projection	-0.274*	0.309**	-0.175	0.095	-0.148	0.253*	-0.180	0.192	0.335**
Passive Aggression	0.064	-0.084	0.237*	0.102	0.053	-0.064	0.097	0.084	0.046
Acting Out	-0.024	0.359**	-0.137	0.109	-0.264*	0.218*	-0.128	0.198	0.347**
Isolation	0.059	0.306**	-0.028	0.013	-0.105	0.227*	-0.156	0.243*	0.124
Devaluation	-0.053	0.313*	-0.053	-0.002	-0.147	0.325*	-0.178	0.094	0.199
Schizoid Fantasy	-0.266**	0.477**	-0.080	0.065	-0.287**	0.290**	0.000	0.250*	0.299**
Denial	-0.077	-0.158	-0.028	-0.074	-0.029	-0.044	-0.043	0.164	-0.046
Displacement	-0.283*	0.256*	-0.261*	-0.119	-0.165	0.143	-0.208	0.271*	0.271*
Dissociation	-0.044	-0.155	-0.056	0.020	0.119	0.049	-0.016	0.182	0.097
Splitting	0.003	0.160	-0.055	0.150	-0.099	0.081	-0.116	0.084	0.031
Rationalization	0.077	-0.048	0.107	0.245*	0.106	-0.069	-0.080	-0.146	-0.077
Somatization	-0.012	0.498**	0.010	0.142	-0.316**	0.472**	-0.137	0.249*	0.411**

Source: Own Study.

*p<0,05, **p<0,01

Statistically significant relationships were demonstrated between:

- Briskness and Projection, Schizoid Fantasy, Displacement,
- Perseverance and Humor, Suppression, Undoing, Projection, Acting Out, Isolation, Devaluation, Schizoid Fantasy, Displacement, Somatization,
- Rhythmicality and Passive Aggression, Displacement,
- Sensory Sensitivity and Sublimation, Rationalization,
- Endurance and Suppression, Acting Out, Schizoid Fantasy, Somatization,
- Emotional Reactivity and Humor, Suppression, Undoing, Reaction Formation,

Projection, Acting Out, Isolation, Devaluation, Schizoid Fantasy, Somatization.

The most statistically significant correlations were found for temperamental traits such as Perseverance and Emotional Reactivity. Defense mechanisms classified as mature defenses correlated negatively with Perseverance and Emotional Reactivity. In turn, defense mechanisms from the group of neurotic and immature defenses correlated positively with these two temperamental traits. In turn, negative correlations with defense mechanisms from the groups of immature and neurotic defenses were observed for Briskness and Endurance.

Spearman's rank correlation analysis showed a statistically significant relationships between

professional burnout and such defense mechanisms as: Suppression, Schizoid Fantasy, Displacement and Somatization. The following defense mechanisms were additionally correlated with Disengagement: Undoing, Pseudoaltruism, Isolation. In turn, defense mechanisms such as Projection and Acting Out were correlated with the Exhaustion.

It has been shown that suppression as a defense mechanism in the mature group correlates negatively with professional burnout (in both dimensions). Additionally, there was a statistically significant negative relationship between professional burnout in the Disengagement dimension and Pseudoaltruism, which belongs to the group of neurotic defenses. Moreover, it was proven that immature defense mechanisms such as Somatization, Displacement, Schizoid Fantasy, Isolation, Acting Out, Projection and the neurotic defense mechanism such as Undoing correlated positively with the level of burnout (in one or both dimensions).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Relationships between perseverance and emotional reactivity with mature defense mechanisms and briskness, endurance, perseverance and emotional reactivity with neurotic and immature defense mechanisms were found. This most likely means that psychotherapists who are characterized by a high level of perseverance and emotional reactivity use neurotic and immature defense mechanisms to a greater extent, and mature defense mechanisms to a lesser extent. In turn, psychotherapists who are characterized by a high level of briskness and endurance use neurotic and immature defense mechanisms to a lesser extent.

These results mostly confirm the assumptions contained in the content of the work and the studies mentioned in it. According to them, it has been shown that temperament plays a key role in the selection of defense mechanisms used [9] and it is suggesting complex relationship between the two. However, no relationship was found with all temperament traits. This issue would require further investigation in larger numbers of people.

Relationships were shown between Suppression, Schizoid Fantasy, Displacement, Somati-

zation and professional burnout, and between Undoing, Pseudoaltruism, Isolation and Disengagement and between Projection, Acting Out and Exhaustion. These results may suggest that psychotherapists who use the mature defense mechanism of suppression and pseudoaltruism (which is a neurotic defense mechanism) reduce the level of professional burnout and disengagement at work. If they use immature defense mechanisms, such as Somatization, Displacement, Schizoid Fantasy, Isolation, Acting Out, Projection and the neurotic defense mechanism such as Undoing, probably they are at greater risk of developing professional burnout.

These results mostly confirm the assumptions contained in the content of the work and the studies mentioned in it. According to the theory cited, it was revealed that defense mechanisms modify the perception of internal and external realities that the individual cannot cope with (in this case, stress and professional burnout). Moreover, it has been confirmed that adaptive/mature defense mechanisms alleviate the resulting conflict and thus determine a person's mental health [10-24]. These results, however, would require repetition in a larger research group to confirm the revealed relationships.

It is possible that the more frequent use of somatization, displacement, schizoid fantasy, isolation, acting out, projection and undoing by psychotherapists may translate into a higher level of professional burnout. Instead, it seems beneficial to use suppression and pseudoaltruism, the use of which probably reduces the level of burnout in a group of psychotherapists.

In subsequent research, it is worth checking the mediating effect of individual defense mechanisms in the relationship between temperamental traits and professional burnout among psychotherapists.

The obtained results are valuable because they were obtained in a group diverse in terms of age, education, psychotherapeutic trend, place and work experience. However, they may indicate the need for repeating the research on a larger sample and further exploration of this topic due to the shortage of publications devoted to psychotherapeutic work. The importance of other temperamental traits that did not reveal any correlations in the study seems worth

considering, as well as neurotic defense mechanisms that are neutral. An interesting perspective could also be narrowing down the study group due to psychotherapeutic approach (e.g. psychodynamic approach, cognitive-behavioural approach), the nature of the psychotherapy being conducted (e.g. individual, couples, family, group), type of patient/client (e.g. children, adolescents, adults) or work environment (e.g. psychiatric ward, own office). The suggested analyses would presumably show whether the nature of work influences the discussed relationships due to the specificity of the burdens occurring in the profession of a psychotherapist.

Conducting further research seems important, especially due to the growing demand for mental health services and the related training of an increasing number of specialists. For example, awareness that psychotherapists with specific temperamental traits tend to use particular defense mechanisms or knowledge of the impact of the defenses used on professional burnout may prove crucial in the course of psychotherapy and establishing a therapeutic relationship with the patient/client. It also seems valuable to understand that internal resources, biologically constituted, may support or threaten psychotherapeutic work, so it is worth taking a closer look at them. This awareness may be useful, especially in difficult situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to other resources is limited.

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